



---

## A Simple Act of Piety

by Achmed Abdullah

---

HIS affair that night was prosy. He was intending the murder of an old Spanish woman around the corner, on the Bowery, whom he had known for years, with whom he had always exchanged courteous greetings, and whom he neither liked nor disliked.

He did kill her; and she knew that he was going to the minute he came into her stuffy, smelly shop, looming tall and bland, and yellow, and unearthly Chinese from behind the shapeless bundles of second-hand goods that cluttered the doorway. He wished her good evening in tones that were silvery, but seemed tainted by something unnatural. She was uncertain what it was, and this very uncertainty increased her horror. She felt her hair rise as if drawn by a shivery wind.

At the very last she caught a glimmer of the truth in his narrow-lidded, purple-black eyes. But it was too late.

The lean, curved knife was in his hand and across her scraggy throat--there was a choked gurgle, a crimson line broadening to a crimson smear, a thudding fall--and that was the end of the affair as far as she was concerned.

A minute later Nag Hong Fah walked over to the other end of Pell Street and entered a liquor-store which belonged to the Chin Sor Company, and was known as the "Place of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment." It was the gathering-place for the Chinese-born members of the Nag family, and there he occupied a seat of honor because of his wealth and charity and stout rectitude.

He talked for about half an hour with the other members of his clan, sipping fragrant, sun-dried Formosa tea mixed with jessamine-flowers, until he had made for himself a bullet-proof alibi.

The alibi held.

For he is still at liberty. He is often heard to speak with regret--nor is it hypocritical regret--about the murder of Señora Garcia, the old Spanish woman who kept the shop around the corner. He is a good customer of her nephew, Carlos, who succeeded to her business. Nor does he trade there to atone, in a manner, for the red deed of his hands, but because the goods are cheap.

He regrets nothing. To regret, you must find sin in your heart, while the murder of Señora Garcia meant no sin to him. It was to him a simple action, respectable, even worthy.

For he was a Chinaman, and, although it all happened between the chocolate-brown of the Hudson and the murky, cloudy gray of the North River, the tale is of the Orient. There is about it an atmosphere of age-green bronze; of first-chop chandoo and spicy aloewood; of gilt, carved statues brought out of India when Confucius was young; of faded embroideries, musty with the scent of the dead centuries. An atmosphere which is very sweet, very gentle--and very unhuman.

The Elevated roars above. The bluecoat shuffles his flat feet on the greasy asphalt below. But still the tale is of China--and the dramatic climax, in a Chinaman's story, from a Chinaman's slightly twisted angle, differs from that of an American.

To Nag Hong Fah this climax came not with the murder of Señora Garcia, but with Fanny Mei Hi's laugh as she saw him with the shimmering bauble in his hands and heard his appraisal thereof.

She was his wife, married to him honorably and truly with a narrow gold band and a clergyman and a bouquet of wired roses bought cheaply from an itinerant Greek vendor, and handfuls of rice thrown by facetious and drunken members of both the yellow race and the white.

Of course, at the time of his marriage, a good many people around Pell Street whispered and gossiped. They spoke of the curling black smoke and slavery and other gorgeously, romantically wicked things. Miss Edith Rutter, the social settlement investigator, spoke of--and to--the police.

Whereas Nag Hong Fah, who had both dignity and a sense of humor, invited them all to his house: gossipers, whisperers, Miss Edith Rutter, and Detective Bill Devoy of the Second Branch, and bade them look to their hearts' content; and whereas they found no opium, no sliding panels, and hidden cupboards, no dread Mongol mysteries, but a neat little steam-heated flat, furnished by Grand Rapids via Fourteenth Street, German porcelain, a case of blond Milwaukee beer, a five-pound humidor of shredded Kentucky burlap tobacco, a victrola, and a fine, big Bible with brass clamp and edges and M. Doré's illustrations.

"Call again," he said as they were trooping down the narrow stairs. "Call again any time you please. Glad to have you--aren't we, kid?" chucking his wife under the chin.

"You bet yer life, you fat old yellow sweetness!" agreed Fanny; and then--as a special barbed shaft leveled at Miss Rutter's retreating back: "Say! Any time yer wanta lamp my wedding certificate--it's hangin' between the fottygraphs of the President and the Big Boss--all framed up swell!"

He had met her first one evening in a Bowery saloon, where she was introduced to him by Mr. Brian Neill, the owner of the saloon, a gentleman from out the County Armagh, who had spattered and muddled his proverbial Irish chastity in the slime of the Bowery gutters, and who called himself her uncle.

This latter statement had to be taken with a grain of salt. For Fanny Mei Hi was not Irish. Her hair was golden, her eyes blue. But otherwise she was Chinese. Easily nine-tenths of her. Of course she denied it. But that is neither here nor there.

She was not a lady. Couldn't be--don't you see--with that mixed blood in her veins, Mr. Brian Neill acting as her uncle, and the standing pools of East Side vice about her.

But Nag Hong Fah, who was a poet and a philosopher, besides being the proprietor of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace, said that she looked like a golden-haired goddess of evil, familiar with all the seven sins. And he added--this to the soothsayer of his clan, Nag Hop Fat--that he did not mind her having seven, nor seventeen nor seven times seventeen bundles of sin, as long as she kept them in the sacred bosom of the Nag family.

"Yes," said the soothsayer, throwing up a handful of painted ivory sticks and watching how they fell to see if the omens were favorable. "Purity is a jewel to the silly young. And you are old, honorable cousin---"

"Indeed," chimed in Nag Hong Fah, "I am old and fat and sluggish and extremely wise. What price is there in purity higher than there is contained in the happiness and contentment of a respectable citizen when he sees men-children playing gently about his knees?"

He smiled when his younger brother, Nag Sen Yat, the opium merchant, spoke to him of a certain Yung Quai.

"Yung Quai is beautiful," said the opium merchant "and young--and of an honorable clan--and---"

"And childless! And in San Francisco! And divorced from me!"

"But there is her older brother, Yung Long, the head of the Yung clan. He is powerful and rich--the richest man in Pell Street! He would consider this new marriage of yours a disgrace to his face. Chiefly since the woman is a foreigner!"

"She is not. Only her hair and her eyes are foreign."

"Where hair and eyes lead, the call of the blood follows," rejoined Nag Sen Yat, and he reiterated his warning about Yung Long.

But the other shook his head.

"Do not give wings to trouble. It flies swiftly without them," he quoted. "Too, the soothsayer read in the painted sticks that Fanny Mei Hi will bear me sons. One--perhaps two. Afterward, if indeed it be so that the drop of barbarian blood has clouded the clear mirror of her Chinese soul, I can always take back into my household the beautiful and honorable Yung Quai, whom I divorced and sent to California because she is childless. She will then adopt the sons which the other woman will bear me--and everything will be extremely satisfactory."

And so he put on his best American suit, called on Fanny, and proposed to her with a great deal of dignity and elaborate phrases.

"Sure I'll marry you," said Fanny. "Sure! I'd rather be the wife of the fattest, yellowest Chink in New York than live the sorta life I'm livin'--see, Chinkie-Toodles?"

"Chinkie-Toodles" smiled. He looked her over approvingly. He said to himself that doubtless the painted sticks had spoken the truth, that she would bear him men-children. His own mother had been a river-girl, purchased during a drought for a handful of parched grain; and had died in the odor of sanctity, with nineteen Buddhist priests following her gaily lacquered coffin, wagging their shaven polls ceremoniously, and mumbling flattering and appropriate verses from "Chin-Kong-Ching."

Fanny, on the other hand, though wickedly and lyingly insisting on her pure white blood, knew that a Chinaman is broad-minded and free-handed, that he makes a good husband, and beats his wife rather less often than a white man of the corresponding scale of society.

Of course, gutter-bred, she was aggressively insistent upon her rights.

"Chinkie-Toodles," she said the day before the wedding, and the gleam in her eyes gave point to the words, "I'm square--see? An' I'm goin' to travel square. Maybe I haven't always been a poifec' lady, but I ain't goin' to bilk yer, get me? But---" She looked up, and suddenly, had Nag Hong Fah known it, the arrogance, the clamorings, and the tragedy of her mixed blood were in the words that followed: "I gotta have a dose of freedom. I'm an American--I'm white--say!"--seeing the smile which he hid rapidly behind his fat hand--"yer needn't laugh. I am white, an' not a painted Chinese doll. No sittin' up an' mopin' for the retrain of my fat, yellow lord an' master in a stuffy, stinky, punky five-by-four cage for me! In other words, I resolve for my little golden-haired self the freedom of asphalt an' electric lights, see? An' I'll play square--as long as you'll play square," she added under her breath.

"Sure," he said. "You are free. Why not? I am an American. Have a drink?" And they sealed the bargain in a tumbler of Chinese rice whisky, cut with Bourbon, and flavored with aniseed and powdered ginger.

The evening following the wedding, husband and wife, instead of a honeymoon trip, went on an alcoholic spree amid the newly varnished splendors of their Pell Street flat. Side by side, in spite of the biting December cold, they leaned from the open window and brayed an intoxicated pæan at the Elevated structure which pointed at the stars like a gigantic icicle stood on end, frozen, austere--desolate, for all its clank and rattle, amid the fragrant warm reek of China which drifted from shutters and cellar-gratings.

Nag Hong Fah, seeing Yung Long crossing the street thought with drunken sentimentality of Yung Long's sister whom he had divorced because she had borne him no children, and extended a boisterous invitation to come up.

"Come! Have a drink!" he hiccuped.

Yung Long stopped, looked, and refused courteously, but not before he had leveled a slow, appraising glance at the golden-haired Mei Hi, who was shouting by the side of her obese lord. Yung Long was not a bad-looking man, standing there in the flickering light of the street-lamp the black shadows cutting the pale-yellow, silky sheen of his narrow, powerful face as clean as with a knife.

"Swell looker, that Chink!" commented Fanny Mei Hi as Yung Long walked away; and her husband, the liquor warming his heart into generosity, agreed:

"Sure! Swell looker! Lots of money! Let's have another drink!"

Arrived at the sixth tumbler, Nag Hong Fah, the poet in his soul released by alcohol, took his blushing bride upon his knee and improvised a neat Cantonese love-ditty; but when Fanny awakened the next morning with the sobering suspicion that she had tied herself for life to a drunkard, she found out that her suspicion was unfounded.

The whisky spree had only been an appropriate celebration in honor of the man-child on whom Nag Hong Fah had set his heart; and it was because of this unborn son and the unborn son's future that her husband rose from his tumbled couch, bland, fat, without headache or heartache, left the flat, and bargained for an hour with Yung Long, who was a wholesale grocer, with warehouses in Canton, Manila, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Not a word was said about either Yung Quai or Fanny. The talk dealt entirely with canned bamboo sprouts and preserved leeches, and pickled star-fruit, and brittle almond cakes. It was only after the price had been decided upon and duly sealed with the right phrases and palm touching palm--afterwards, though nothing in writing had passed, neither party could recede from the bargain without losing face--that Yung Long remarked.

"By the way, the terms are cash--spot cash," and he smiled.

For he knew that the restaurant proprietor was an audacious merchant who relied on long credits and future profits, and to whom in the past he had always granted ninety days' leeway without question or special agreement.

Nag Hong Fah smiled in his turn; a slow, thin, enigmatic smile.

"I brought the cash with me," he replied, pulling a wad of greenbacks from his pocket, and both gentlemen looked at each other with a great deal of mutual respect.

"Forty-seven dollars and thirty-three cents saved on the first business of my married life," Nag Hong Fah said to his assembled clan that night at the Place of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment. "Ah, I shall have a fine, large business to leave to the man-child which my wife shall bear me!"

And the man-child came--golden-haired, blue-eyed, yellow-skinned, and named Brian in honor of Fanny's apocryphal uncle who owned the Bowery saloon. For the christening Nag Hong Fah sent out special invitations--pink cards lettered with virulent magenta, and bordered with green forget-me-nots and purple roses, with an advertisement of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace on the reverse side. He also bestowed upon his wife a precious bracelet of cloudy white jade, earrings of green jade cunningly inlaid with blue feathers, a chest of carved Tibetan soapstone, a bottle of French perfume, a pound of Mandarin blossom tea for which he paid seventeen dollars wholesale, a set of red Chinese sabres, and a new Caruso record for the victrola.

Fanny liked the last two best; chiefly the furs, which she wore through the whirling heat of an August day, as soon as she was strong enough to leave her couch, on an expedition to her native pavements. For she held fast to her proclaimed right that hers was the freedom of asphalt and electric light--not to mention the back parlor of her uncle's saloon, with its dingy, musty walls covered with advertisements of eminent Kentucky distilleries and the indelible traces of many generations of flies, with its gangrened tables, its battered cuspidors, its commingling atmosphere of poverty and sloth, of dust and stale beer, of cheese sandwiches, wet weeds, and cold cigars.

"Getta hell outa here!" she admonished a red-powdered bricklayer who came staggering across the threshold of the back parlor and was trying to encircle her waist with amatory intent. "I'm a respectable married woman--see?" And then to Miss Ryan, the side-kick of her former riotous spinster days, who was sitting at a corner table dipping her pretty little upturned nose into a foaming schooner: "Take my tip, Mamie, an' marry a Chink! That's the life, believe me!"

Mamie shrugged her shoulders.

"All right for you, Fan, I guess," she replied. "But not for me. Y' see--ye're mostly Chink yerself---"

"I ain't! I ain't! I'm white--wottya mean callin' me a Chink?" And then, seeing signs of contrition on her friend's face: "Never mind. Chinkie-Toodles is good enough for me. He treats me white, all right, all right!"

Nor was this an overstatement of the actual facts.

Nag Hong Fah was good to her. He was happy in the realization of his fatherhood, advertised every night by lusty cries which reverberated through the narrow, rickety Pell Street house to find an echo across the street in the liquor-store of the Chin Sor Company, where the members of his clan predicted a shining future for father and son.

The former was prospering. The responsibilities of fatherhood had brought an added zest and tang to his keen, bartering Mongol brain. Where before he had squeezed the dollar, he was now squeezing the cent. He had many a hard tussle with the rich Yung Long over the price of tea and rice and other staples, and never did either one of them mention the name of Yung Quai, nor that of the woman who had supplanted Yung Quai in the restaurant-keeper's affections.

Fanny was honest. She traveled the straight and narrow, as she put it to herself. "Nor ain't it any strain on my feet," she confided to Miss Ryan. For she was happy and contented. Life, after all, had been good to her, had brought her prosperity and satisfaction at the hands of a fat Chinaman, at the end of her fantastic, twisted, unclean youth, and there were moments when, in spite of herself, she felt herself drawn into the surge of that Mongol race which had given her nine-tenths of her blood--a fact which formerly she had been in the habit of denying vigorously.

She laughed her happiness through the spiced, warm mazes of Chinatown, her first-born cuddled to her breast, ready to be friends with everybody.

It was thus that Yung Long would see her walking down Pell Street as he sat in the carved window-seat of his store, smoking his crimson-tassled pipe, a wandering ray of sun dancing through the window, breaking into prismatic colors, and wreathing his pale, serene face with opal vapors.

He never failed to wave his hand in courtly greeting.

She never failed to return the civility.

Some swell looker, that Chink. But--Gawd!--she was square, all right, all right!

A year later, after Nag Hong Fah, in expectation of the happy event, had acquired an option on a restaurant farther up-town, so that the second son might not be slighted in favor of Brian, who was to inherit the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace, Fanny sent another little cross-breed into the reek and riot of the Pell Street world. But when Nag Hong Fah came home that night, the nurse told him that the second-born was a girl--something to be entered on the debit, not the credit, side of the family ledger.

It was then that a change came into the marital relations of Mr. and Mrs. Nag Hong Fah.

Not that the former disliked the baby daughter, called Fanny, after the mother. Far from it. He loved her with a sort of slow, passive love, and he could be seen on an afternoon rocking the wee bundle in his stout arms and whispering to her crooning Cantonese fairy-lilts: all about the god of small children whose face is a candied plum, so that the babes like to hug and kiss him and, of course, lick his face with their little pink tongues.

But this time there was no christening, no gorgeous magenta-lettered invitations sent to the chosen, no happy prophecies about the future.

This time there were no precious presents of green jade and white jade heaped on the couch of the young mother.

She noticed it. But she did not complain. She said to herself that her husband's new enterprise was swallowing all his cash; and one night she asked him how the new restaurant was progressing.

"What new restaurant?" he asked blandly.

"The one up-town, Toodles--for the baby---"

Nag Hong Fah laughed carelessly.

"Oh--I gave up that option. Didn't lose much."

Fanny sat up straight, clutching little Fanny to her.

"You--you gave it up?" she asked. "Wottya mean--gave it up?"

Then suddenly inspired by some whisper of suspicion, her voice leaping up extraordinarily strong: "You mean you gave it up--because--because little Fanny is--a goil?"

He agreed with a smiling nod.

"To be sure! A girl is fit only to bear children and clean the household pots."

He said it without any brutality, without any conscious male superiority; simply as a statement of fact. A melancholy fact, doubtless. But a fact, unchangeable.

"But--but---" Fanny's gutter flow of words floundered in the eddy of her amazement, her hurt pride and vanity. "I'm a woman myself--an' I---"

"Assuredly you are a woman and you have done your duty. You have borne me a son. Perhaps, if the omens be favorable you will bear me yet another. But this--this girl---" He dismissed little Fanny with a wave of his pudgy, dimpled hand as a regrettable accident, and continued, soothingly: "She will be taken care of. Already I have written to friends of our clan in San Francisco to arrange for a suitable disposal when the baby has reached the right age." He said it in his mellow, precise English. He had learned it at a night-school, where he had been the pride and honor of his class.

Fanny had risen. She left her couch. With a swish-swish of knitted bed-slippers she loomed up on the ring of faint light shed by the swinging petroleum lamp in the center of the room. She approached her husband, the baby held close to her heart with her left hand, her right hand aimed at Nag Hong Fah's solid chest like a pistol. Her deep-set, violet-blue eyes seemed to pierce through him.

But the Chinese blood in her veins--shrewd, patient--scotched the violence of her American passion, her American sense of loudly clamoring for right and justice and fairness. She controlled herself. The accusing hand relaxed and fell gently on the man's shoulder. She was fighting for her daughter, fighting for the drop of white blood in her veins, and it would not do to lose her temper.

"Looka here, Chinkie-Toodles," she said. "You call yerself a Christian, don't yer? A Christian an' an American. Well, have a heart. An' some sense! This ain't China, Toodles. Lil Fanny ain't goin' to be weighed an' sold to some rich brother Chink at so many seeds per pound. Not much! She's gonna be eddycated. She's gonna have her chance, see? She 's gonna be independent of the male beast an' the sorta life wot the male beast likes to hand to a skoit. Believe me, Toodles, I know what I'm talkin' about!"

But he shook his stubborn head. "All has been settled," he replied. "Most satisfactorily settled!"

He turned to go. But she rushed up to him. She clutched his sleeve

"Yer--yer don't mean it? Yer can't mean it!" she stammered.

"I do, fool!" He made a slight, weary gesture as if brushing away the incomprehensible. "You are a woman--you do not understand---"

"Don't I, though!"

She spoke through her teeth. Her words clicked and broke like dropping icicles. Swiftly her passion turned into stone, and as swiftly back again, leaping out in a great, spattering stream of abuse.

"Yer damned, yellow, stinkin' Chink! Yer--yer--Wottya mean--makin' me bear children--yer own children--an' then---" Little Fanny was beginning to howl lustily and she covered her face with kisses. "Say kiddie, it 's a helluva dad you 've drawn! A helluva dad! Look at him--standin' there! Greasy an' yellow an'--Say--he 's willin' to sell yer into slavery to some other beast of a Chink! Say---"

"You are a--ah--a Chink yourself, fool!"

"I ain't! I'm white--an; square--an,' decent--an'---"

He lit a cigarette and smiled placidly, and suddenly she knew that it would be impossible to argue, to plead with him. Might as well plead with some sardonic, deaf immensity, without nerves, without heart. And then, womanlike, the greater wrong disappeared in the lesser.

"Ye 're right. I'm part Chink myself--an' damned sorry for myself because of it! An' that 's why I know why yer gave me no presents when lil Fanny was born. Because she's a girl! As if that was my fault, yer fat, sneerin' slob, yer! Yah! That 's why yer gave me no presents--I know! I know what it means when a Chink don't give no presents to his wife when she gives both to a child! Make me lose face--that 's wottya call it, ain't it? An' I thought fer a while yer was savin' up the ducats to give lil Fanny a start in life!

"Well, yer got another guess comin'! Yer gonna do wot I tell yer, see? Yer gonna open up that there new restaurant up-town, an' yer gonna give me presents! A bracelet, that's what I want! None o' yer measly Chink jade, either; but the real thing, get me? Gold an' diamonds, see?" and she was still talking as he, unmoved, silent, smiling, left the room and went down the creaking stairs to find solace in the spiced cups of the Palace of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment.

She rushed up to the window and threw it wide. She leaned far out, her hair framing her face like a glorious, disordered aureole, her loose robe slipping from her gleaming shoulders, her violet eyes blazing fire and hatred.

She shouted at his fat, receding back:

"A bracelet, that's what I want! That's what I'm gonna get, see? Gold an' diamonds! Gold an' diamonds, yer yellow pig, yer!"

It was at that moment that Yung Long passed her house. He heard, looked up, and greeted her courteously, as was his wont. But this time he did not go straight on his way. He looked at her for several seconds, taking in the soft lines of her neck and shoulders, the small, pale oval of her face with the crimson of her broad, generous mouth, the white flash of her small, even teeth, and the blue, sombre orbit of her eyes. With the light of the lamp shining in back, a breeze rushing in front past the open window, the wide sleeves of her dressing-gown fluttered like immense, rosy butterfly-wings.

Instinctively she returned his gaze. Instinctively, straight through her rage and heartache, the old thought came



to her mind:

Swell looker--that Chink!

And then, without realizing what she was doing, her lips had formed the thought into words:

"Swell looker!"

She said it in a headlong and vehement whisper that drifted down, through the whirling reek of Pell Street--sharp, sibilant, like a message.

Yung Long smiled, raised his neat bowler hat, and went on his way.

Night after night Fanny returned to the attack, cajoling, caressing, threatening, cursing.

"Listen here, Chinkie-Toodles--"

But she might as well have tried to argue with the sphinx for all the impression she made on her eternally smiling lord. He would drop his amorphous body into a comfortable rocker, moving it up and down with the tips of his felt-slipped feet, a cigarette hanging loosely from the right corner of his coarse, sagging lips, a cup of lukewarm rice whisky convenient to his elbow, and watch her as he might the gyrations of an exotic beetle whose wings had been burned off. She amused him. But after a while continuous repetition palled the amusement into monotony, and, correctly Chinese, he decided to make a formal complaint to Brian O'Neill, the Bowery saloon-keeper, who called himself her uncle.

Life, to that prodigal of Erin, was a rather sunny arrangement of small conveniences and small, pleasant vices. He laughed in his throat and called his "nephew" a damned, sentimental fool.

"Beat her up!" was his calm, matter-of-fact advice. "Give her a good old hiding, an' she'll feed outa yer hand, me lad!"

"I have--ah--your official permission, as head of her family?"

"Sure. Wait. I'll lend ye me blackthorn. She knows the taste of it."

Nag Hong Fah took both advice and blackthorn. That night he gave Fanny a severe beating and repeated the performance every night for a week until she subsided.

Once more she became the model wife, and happiness returned to the stout bosom of her husband. Even Miss Rutter, the social settlement investigator, commented upon it. "Real love is a shelter of inexpugnable peace," she said when she saw the Nag Hong Fah family walking down Pell Street, little Brian toddling on ahead, the baby cuddled in her mother's arms.

Generously Nag Hong Fah overlooked his wife's petty womanish vanities; and when she came home one afternoon, flushed, excited, exhibiting a shimmering bracelet that was encircling her wrist, "just imitation gold an' diamonds, Chinkie-Toodles!" she explained. "Bought it outa my savings--thought yer wouldn't mind, see? Thought it wouldn't hurt yer none if them Chinks hereabouts think it was the real dope an' yer gave it to me"--he smiled and took her upon his knee as of old.

"Yes, yes," he said, his pudgy hand fondling the intense golden gleam of her tresses. "It is all right. Perhaps--if you bear me another son--I shall give you a real bracelet, real gold, real diamonds. Meanwhile you may wear this bauble."

As before she hugged jealously her proclaimed freedom of asphalt and electric lights. Nor did he raise the slightest objections. He had agreed to it at the time of their marriage and, being a righteous man, he kept to his part of the bargain with serene punctiliousness.

Brian Neill, whom he chanced to meet one afternoon in Señora Garcia's second-hand emporium, told him it was all right.

"That beatin' ye gave her didn't do her any harm, me beloved nephew," he said. "She's square. God help the lad who tries to pass a bit o' blarney to her." He chuckled in remembrance of a Finnish sailor who had beaten a sudden and undignified retreat from the back parlor into the saloon, with a ragged scratch crimsoning his face and bitter words about the female of the species crowding his lips. "Faith, she 's square! Sits there with her little glass o' gin an' her auld chum, Mamie Ryan--an' them two chews the rag by the hour--talkin' about frocks an' frills, I doubt not---"

Of course, once in a while she would return home a little the worse for liquor. But Nag Hong Fah, being a Chinaman, would mantle such small shortcomings with the wide charity of his personal laxity.

"Better a drunken wife who cooks well and washes the children and keeps her tongue between her teeth than a sober wife who reeks with virtue and breaks the household pots," he said to Nag Hop Fat, the soothsayer. "Better an honorable pig than a cracked rose bottle."

"Indeed! Better a fleet mule than a hamstrung horse," the other wound up the pleasant round of Oriental metaphors, and he reënforced his opinion with a chosen and appropriate quotation from the "Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King."

When late one night that winter, a high wind booming from the north and washing the snow-dusted Pell Street houses with its cutting blast, Fanny came home with a jag, a chill, and a hacking cough, and went down with pneumonia seven hours later, Nag Hong Fah was genuinely sorry. He turned the management of his restaurant over to his brother, Nag Sen Yat, and sat by his wife's bed, whispering words of encouragement, bathing her feverish forehead, changing her sheets, administering medicine, doing everything with fingers as soft and deft as a woman's.

Even after the doctor had told him three nights later that the case was hopeless and that Fanny would die--even after, as a man of constructive and practical brain, he had excused himself for a few minutes and had sat down in the back room to write a line to Yung Quai, his divorced wife in San Francisco, bidding her hold herself in readiness and including a hundred dollars for transportation--he continued to treat Fanny Mei Hi with the utmost gentleness and patience.

Tossing on her hot pillows, she could hear him in the long watches of the night breathing faintly, clearing his throat cautiously so as not to disturb her; and on Monday morning--he had lifted her up and was holding her close to help her resist the frightful, hacking cough that was shaking her wasted frame--he told her that he had reconsidered about little Fanny.

"You are going to die," he said placidly, in a way, apologetically, "and it is fitting that your daughter should make proper obeisance to your departed spirit. A child's devotion is best stimulated by gratitude. And little Fanny shall be grateful to you. For she will go to a good American school and, to pay for it, I shall sell your possessions after you are dead. The white jade bracelet, the earrings of green jade, the red sables--they will bring over four thousand dollars. Even this little bauble"--he slipped the glittering bracelet from her thin wrist--"this, too, will bring a few dollars. Ten, perhaps twelve; I know a dealer of such trifles in Mott Street who---"

"Say!"

Her voice cut in, raucous, challenging. She had wriggled out of his arms. An opaque glaze had come over her violet-blue eyes. Her whole body trembled. But she pulled herself on her elbows with a terrible, straining effort, refusing the support of his ready hands.

"Say! How much did yer say this here bracelet's worth?"

He smiled gently. He did not want to hurt her woman's vanity. So he increased his first appraisal.

"Twenty dollars," he suggested. "Perhaps twenty-one. Do not worry. It shall be sold to the best advantage--for your little daughter---"

And then, quite suddenly, Fanny burst into laughter--gurgling laughter that shook her body, choked her throat, and leaped out in a stream of blood from her tortured lungs.

"Twenty dollars!" she cried. "Twenty-one! Say, you poor cheese, that bracelet alone 'll pay for lil Fanny's eddycation. It 's worth three thousand! It 's real, real--gold an' diamonds! Gold an' diamonds! Yung Long gave it to me, yer poor fool!" And she fell back and died, a smile upon her face, which made her look like a sleeping child, wistful and perverse.

A day after his wife's funeral Nag Hong Fah, having sent a ceremonious letter, called on Yung Long in the latter's store. In the motley, twisted annals of Pell Street the meeting, in the course of time, has assumed the character of something epic, something Homeric, something almost religious. It is mentioned with pride by both the Nag and the Yung clans; the tale of it has drifted to the Pacific Coast; and even in far China wise men speak of it with a hush of reverence as they drift down the river on their painted house-boats in peach-blossom time.

Yung Long received his caller at the open door of his shop.

"Deign to enter first," he said, bowing.

Nag Hong Fah bowed still lower.

"How could I dare to?" he retorted, quoting a line from the "Book of Ceremonies and Exterior Demonstrations," which proved that the manner is the heart's inner feeling.

"Please deign to enter first," Yung Long emphasized and again the other gave the correct reply: "How should I dare?"

Then, after a final request, still protesting, he entered as he was bidden. The grocer followed, walked to the east side of the store and indicated the west side to his visitor as Chinese courtesy demands.

"Deign to choose your mat," he went on and, after several coy refusals, Nag Hong Fah obeyed again, sat down, and smiled gently at his host.

"A pipe?" suggested the latter

"Thanks! A simple pipe of bamboo, please, with a plain bamboo mouthpiece and no ornaments!"

"No, no!" protested Yung Long. "You will smoke a precious pipe of jade with a carved amber mouthpiece and crimson tassels!"

He clapped his hands, whereupon one of his young cousins entered with a tray of nacre, supporting an

opium-lamp, pipes and needles and bowls, and horn and ivory boxes neatly arranged. A minute later the brown opium cube was sizzling over the open flame, the jade pipe was filled and passed to Nag Hong Fah, who inhaled the gray, acrid smoke with all the strength of his lungs, then returned the pipe to the boy, who refilled it and passed it to Yung Long.

For a while the two men smoked in silence--men of Pell Street, men of lowly trade, yet men at whose back three thousand years of unbroken racial history, racial pride, racial achievements, and racial calm, were sitting in a solemn, graven row--thus dignified men.

Yung Long was caressing his cheek with his right hand. The dying, crimson sunlight danced and glittered on his well-polished finger-nails.

Finally he broke the silence.

"Your wife is dead," he said with a little mournful cadence at the end of the sentence.

"Yes." Nag Hong Fah inclined his head sadly; and after a short pause: "My friend, it is indeed reasonable to think that young men are fools, their brains hot and crimson with the blinding mists of passion, while wisdom and calm are the splendid attributes of older men---"

"Such as--you and I?"

"Indeed!" decisively.

Yung Long raised himself on his elbows. His oblique eyes flashed a scrutinizing look and the other winked a slow wink and remarked casually that a wise and old man must first peer into the nature of things, then widen his knowledge, then harden his will, then control the impulses of his heart, then entirely correct himself--then establish good order in his family.

"Truly spoken," agreed Yung Long. "Truly spoken, O wise and older brother! A family! A family needs the strength of a man and the soft obedience of a woman."

"Mine is dead," sighed Nag Hong Fah. "My household is upset. My children cry."

Yung Long slipped a little fan from his wide silken sleeves and opened it slowly.

"I have a sister," he said gently, "Yung Quai, a childless woman who once was your wife, O wise and older brother."

"A most honorable woman!" Nag Hong Fah shut his eyes and went on: "I wrote to her five days ago, sending her money for her railway fare to New York."

"Ah!" softly breathed the grocer; and there followed another silence.

Yung Long's young cousin was kneading, against the pipe, the dark opium cubes which the flame gradually changed into gold and amber.

"Please smoke," advised the grocer

Nag Hong Fah had shut his eyes completely, and his fat face, yellow as old parchment, seemed to have grown indifferent, dull, almost sleepy.

Presently he spoke:

"Your honorable sister, Yung Quai, will make a most excellent mother for the children of my late wife."

"Indeed."

There was another silence, again broken by Nag Hong Fah. His voice held a great calmness, a gentle singsong, a bronze quality which was like the soft rubbing of an ancient temple gong; green with the patina of the swinging centuries.

"My friend," he said, "there is the matter of a shimmering bracelet given by you to my late wife---"

Yung Long looked up quickly; then down again as he saw the peaceful expression on the other's bland features and heard him continue:

"For a while I misunderstood. My heart was blinded. My soul was seared with rage. I--I am ashamed to own up to it--I harbored harsh feelings against you. Then I considered that you were the older brother of Yung Quai and a most honorable man. I considered that in giving the bracelet to my wife you doubtless meant to show your appreciation for me, your friend, her husband. Am I not right?"

Yung Long had filled his lungs with another bowlful of opium smoke. He was leaning back, both shoulders on the mat so as the better to dilate his chest and to keep his lungs filled all the longer with the fumes of the kindly philosophic drug.

"Yes," he replied after a minute or two. "Your indulgent lips have pronounced words full of harmony and reason. Only--there is yet another trifling matter."

"Name it. It shall be honorably solved."

Yung Long sat up and fanned himself slowly.

"At the time when I arranged a meeting with the mother of your children," he said, "so as to speak to her of my respectful friendship for you and to bestow upon her a shimmering bracelet in proof of it, I was afraid of the wagging, leaky tongues of Pell Street. I was afraid of scandal and gossip. I therefore met your wife in the back room of Señora Garcia's store, on the Bowery. Since then I have come to the conclusion that perhaps I acted foolishly. For the foreign woman may have misinterpreted my motives. She may talk, thus causing you as well as me to lose face, and besmirching the departed spirit of your wife. What sayeth the 'Li-Ki'? 'What is whispered in the private apartments must not be shouted outside.' Do you not think that this foreign woman should--ah---"

Nag Hong Fah smiled affectionately upon the other.

"You have spoken true words, O wise and older brother," he said rising. "It is necessary for your and my honor, as well as for the honor of my wife's departed spirit, that the foreign woman should not wag her tongue. I shall see to it to-night." He waved a fat, deprecating hand. "Yes--yes. I shall see to it. It is a simple act of family piety--but otherwise without much importance."

And he bowed, left the store, and returned to his house to get his lean knife.